

Fall 2006

You're the Top: Illustrated Sheet Music of American Popular Songs from World War I to the 1940s

Peter J. Knapp

Trinity College, peter.knapp@trincoll.edu

Anne H. Knapp

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/exhibitions>



Part of the [Illustration Commons](#), and the [Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Knapp, Peter J. and Knapp, Anne H., "You're the Top: Illustrated Sheet Music of American Popular Songs from World War I to the 1940s" (2006). *Watkinson Publications*. 11.

<http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/exhibitions/11>

YOU'RE THE TOP

Illustrated Sheet Music of American Popular Songs from World War I to the 1940s

During the 19th century, publishers of American popular songs began producing illustrated covers for sheet music. Featuring intricate designs and thematic images, the covers enhanced eye appeal and attracted interest. The music was arranged primarily for piano and included lyrics. From about World War I on, many covers included photographs of composers or performing artists, a trend that continued well into the 20th century. The covers helped promote sales of music and contributed to the popularity of individual songs, many of which were composed for Broadway shows and later also for motion picture musicals. Popularity was also heightened, especially during the 1930s and 1940s, by the performance of songs at live concerts and as dance music by orchestras such as those of Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, and Benny Goodman. In addition, songs were heard on radio broadcasts, phonograph records, and in films.

Popular songs reflect in an engaging way the social and cultural life of America during the first half of the 20th century. In addition to the lyrics, whether sophisticated and witty or expressing longings for simpler times, the covers offer an added dimension for studying the interwar period in the country's history as flappers and dances like the charleston gave way to the Great Depression and the patriotism of World War II.

This exhibition focuses on eight composers whose songs were widely enjoyed during the period from World War I to the 1940s and whose

popularity continues. The exhibition's title is taken from a song written by Cole Porter for his 1934 Broadway show *Anything Goes*. While the songs selected broadly represent American popular music and for the most part are not jazz compositions, many were performed with jazz arrangements. The music displayed is from an extensive collection in the Watkinson Library, the gift of many donors, including E. Abbe Niles, Trinity College, Class of 1916. The feature song for each composer was determined by matching the music with a 78 rpm recording from either of two major collections in the Watkinson formed, respectively, by Abbe Niles and Robert W. Gunshanan, Trinity College, Class of 1943. The selected recordings will be heard as part of the lecture celebrating the exhibition's opening. They may also be heard while viewing the exhibition.

Thanks are extended to Dr. Richard S. Ross, College Librarian, for his encouragement, and to Dr. Jeffrey H. Kaimowitz, Head Librarian of the Watkinson Library, Ms. Sally S. Dickinson, Special Collections Librarian, and Ms. Jacqueline C. Knapp, Class of 2010, for their support and assistance. Special thanks go to President James F. Jones, Jr. for his generous support, and to Mr. Philip J. Duffy, Director of Media Technology, and Mr. Ron Perkins, Media Technology Technician, for their assistance. Appreciation is extended also to the Watkinson Library – Trinity College Library Associates for supporting the exhibition.

Peter J. Knapp
Anne H. Knapp
August 2006

Case I: W. C. Handy

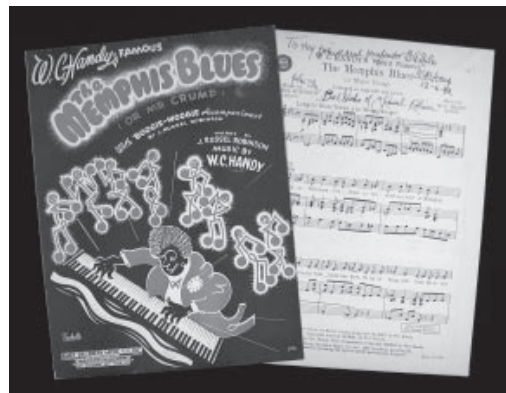
William Christopher Handy (1873-1958), known as W. C. Handy, was a pioneer in preserving and popularizing the blues. As a musical form, the blues had its roots in the vocal tradition of African American work songs and ballads. Handy popularized the blues through instrumental arrangements as well as his own compositions. An accomplished musician and prolific composer, he transcribed many songs that had not previously been published. Handy is perhaps best remembered for his **Saint Louis Blues** (1914).

Edward Abbe Niles (1894-1963), a prominent New York City attorney and jazz critic, was a Trinity graduate in the Class of 1916. After serving in World War I as a pilot and flying instructor in the Air Corps, he was a Rhodes Fellow at Christ Church College, Oxford, and received his law degree from Harvard University. Niles's other great interest was lawn tennis, and he was active in the Eastern Lawn Tennis Association. In this photograph from the Niles Collection, W. C. Handy appears with Abbe and Katharine Niles. Niles became a close friend of Handy and was his legal advisor.

Included in the exhibition is the illustrated cover and music for **Memphis Blues** (1912). This 1940 copyright renewal

edition was inscribed to Niles by Handy and by the lyricist J. Russell Robinson.

The Watkinson's sheet music collection includes several copyright renewal editions of **Saint Louis Blues** (1914), one of Handy's most widely known and earliest songs and the feature song for this composer. Displayed are a 1942 edition with a photograph of Handy, and a 1945 edition with Lena Horne on the cover. Also displayed are the covers for **Beale Street Blues** (1917) and **Yellow Dog Blues** (1919). The recording of **Saint Louis Blues** features Handy himself on the cornet with a small orchestra and was made in New York City on December 26, 1939 for Varsity Records (Niles Collection).



Memphis Blues (1912)

Case II: W. C. Handy

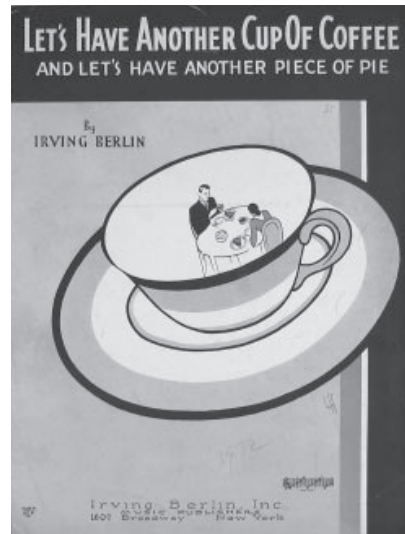
Displayed are the covers for **Harlem Blues** (1922), **Basement Blues** (1924), and **Way Down South Where the Blues Began** (1932), the latter inscribed by Handy to Niles.

Abbe Niles contributed the introduction to **Blues: an anthology**, two copies of which are shown here. Niles's own copy is annotated on the front paste-down and endpaper and is inscribed by Handy and the illustrator, Miguel Covarrubias. Another copy shows the title page and the frontispiece by Covarrubias. The book was published in New York by A. & C. Boni in 1926 and was edited by Handy. The anthology documents the development of the blues.

Also shown is a copy of the first printing of Handy's autobiography, **Father of the Blues** (New York: Macmillan, 1941), edited by Arna Bontemps and with a foreword by Niles. The dust jacket design is the same as the cover for the 1940 edition of **Memphis Blues**. The copy is inscribed to Niles by Handy.



Blues: an anthology (1926)



Let's Have Another Cup of Coffee (1932)

Case III: Irving Berlin

Irving Berlin (1888-1989) was the most prolific composer of popular songs during the 20th century. The embodiment of Tin Pan Alley, he wrote both the music and lyrics for over 3000 songs, among them **God Bless America** (1939), and composed the scores for 21 Broadway shows and 17 films.

Displayed are the covers for the following Berlin classics: **Alexander's Rag Time Band** (1911); **Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning** (1918); the feature song **Blue Skies** (1927), and **The Song Is Ended** (1927). **Blue Skies** was used in the early Warner Brothers sound picture, *Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson. The recording of **Blue Skies** was made in New York City on July 15, 1941 for Victor Records and features the Tommy Dorsey Band with a young Frank Sinatra providing the vocal (Gunshanan Collection).

Case IV: Irving Berlin

The covers in the case include: **Marie** (1928); **How Deep Is the Ocean** (1932); **Let's Have Another Cup of Coffee** (1932) whose opening bars later became the jingle for Nescafé coffee; **Cheek to Cheek** (1935); **I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm** (1937); **White Christmas** (1942); and **They Say It's Wonderful** (1946) from the Broadway show *Annie Get Your Gun*, inspired by the career of Annie Oakley, the 19th-century "trick shot" carnival performer. The show included Berlin's well-known **There's No Business Like Show Business**.

The December 2, 1925 issue of the **New Republic** includes a review by Abbe Niles of Alexander Woollcott's *The Story of Irving Berlin*. Accompanying the article is a letter from Berlin to Niles dated December 21 expressing the composer's appreciation for the favorable review (Niles Collection).

Case V: Hoagy Carmichael

Hoagy Carmichael (1899-1981) had the distinction of composing one of the most frequently recorded popular songs, **Star Dust** (1929). A native of Indiana, he wrote songs whose melodic styling was inspired by jazz. Many of these were published as singles before Carmichael moved to Hollywood to compose for films. Either he or such collaborators as Mitchell Parish, Frank Loesser, and Johnny Mercer, wrote the lyrics, and these generally expressed folksy, down-home emotions that contributed to the popularity of the songs. A vocalist and pianist, Carmichael also acted in motion pictures. His photograph appears on the cover of **Hong Kong Blues** (1939).

In addition to **Star Dust**, the feature song, and **Hong Kong Blues**, covers are displayed for: **Washboard Blues** (1928); **Rockin' Chair** (1930); **Two Sleepy People** (1938); and **Skylark** (1942) with lyrics by Johnny Mercer. **Two Sleepy People** was sung by Shirley Ross and Bob Hope in the Paramount Picture production of *Thanks for the Memory*. The recording of **Star Dust** features Glenn Miller and his orchestra and was made in New York City on January 29, 1940 for Victor Records (Gunshanan Collection).

Also shown is a letter dated January 18, 1936 from Carmichael to George Malcolm-Smith, Trinity College, Class of 1925, a public relations executive for the Travelers Insurance Company of Hartford as well as a novelist, radio personality, and jazz critic (Malcolm-Smith Collection). The letter discusses Carmichael's early career as an instrumentalist and composer and relates how **Star Dust** came into being.



Skylark (1942)

Case VI: George Gershwin

George Gershwin (1898-1937) was deeply influenced by classical composers such as Debussy and Stravinsky as well as by African American music. He composed works for piano and orchestra, including **Rhapsody in Blue** (1924), **Piano Concerto in F** (1925), and the tone poem **American in Paris** (1928) as well as the opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935). Gershwin also composed extensively for Broadway and for Hollywood films, often collaborating with his brother Ira (1896-1983), who was his principal lyricist.

The covers displayed for some of Gershwin's popular songs include **Swanee** (1919), which features the photograph of Al Jolson, who popularized the song; **Fascinating Rhythm** (1924); **Looking For a Boy** (1925); **S'Wonderful** (1927); and **Strike Up the Band** (1927).

Case VII: George Gershwin

Additional songs by Gershwin include: the feature song, **Embraceable You** (1930); **Boy What Love Has Done for Me** (1930); **Summertime** (1935) from *Porgy and Bess*; **They Can't Take That Away From Me** (1937); and **Love Walked In** (1938). The recording of **Embraceable You** was made by Nat King Cole in Los Angeles, circa 1944, for Capitol Records (Gunshanan Collection).



Love Walked in (1938)

Case VIII: Harold Arlen

Harold Arlen (1905-1986), who was responsible for many memorable hit songs, composed for both Broadway and Hollywood, and had the distinction of writing the score for *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), including the unforgettable **Over the Rainbow**. Accompanying Arlen's photograph are the covers for **Stormy Weather** (1933), the feature song; **It's Only a Paper Moon** (1933); **Ill Wind** (1934); **Blues in the Night** (1941); **Ac-cent-tchu-ate the Positive** (1944) from the Paramount Picture production of *Here Come the Waves* starring Bing Crosby and Betty Hutton; and **Evelina** (1944) from the Broadway show *Bloomer Girl*.

Arlen composed **Stormy Weather**, which the music describes as a "slow lament", for the 1933 *Cotton Club Parade* starring Ethel Waters and George Dewey Washington. The production featured Duke Ellington and his orchestra then in residence at the Cotton Club. The lyrics were by Ted Koehler. Other lyricists



Ac-cent-tchu-ate the Positive (1944)

with whom Arlen frequently collaborated included E. Y. (Yip) Harburg and Johnny Mercer. The recording of **Stormy Weather**, an instrumental version, was made by Duke Ellington in New York City for Brunswick Records on May 16, 1933 (Niles Collection).

Case IX: Jerome Kern

Best known for his Broadway musical *Showboat* (1927) and its memorable songs including **Ol' Man River**, **Make Believe**, **Bill**, and **Why Do I Love You?**, Jerome Kern (1885-1945) composed for stage and screen in a career that began during World War I. He collaborated with Oscar Hammerstein 2nd and Guy Bolton as well as with other lyricists including Buddy de Sylva, Otto Harbach, Dorothy Fields, and Johnny Mercer. Shown are the illustrated covers for **Look for the Silver Lining** (1920), **Ol' Man River** (1927), **Smoke Gets in Your Eyes** (the feature song from the 1933 show and subsequent motion picture *Roberta*), **Lovely to Look At** (1935), **All the Things You Are** (1939), and **You Were Never Lovelier** (1942). The illustration of Kern is taken from the back cover of **Lovely to Look At**. The recording of **Smoke Gets in Your Eyes** was made on June 4, 1941 by Benny Goodman and his orchestra for Columbia Records and featured Helen Forrest as vocalist (Gunshanan Collection).



Ol' Man River (1927)

Case X: Cole Porter

Celebrated for his romantic and inventive music and sophisticated lyrics, Cole Porter (1891-1964) began composing at an early age, and while an undergraduate at Yale prior to World War I wrote the music and collaborated on the lyrics for undergraduate shows. His interest in songwriting carried on while he studied law briefly at Harvard, but the attraction of Broadway was irresistible. Initially unsuccessful, Porter traveled through Europe after the War, married a wealthy American divorcée, and resided in Paris, later moving to Venice. His first major hit, **Let's Do It, Let's Fall in Love**, was for the 1928 musical *Paris*, and in its many verses the mention of species after species falling in love prompted a critic to describe the song as a "zoological survey." Among Porter's many successful shows that followed are: *Fifty Million Frenchmen* (1929); *Gay Divorce* (1932); *Anything Goes* (1934); *Kiss Me Kate* (1948); *Can-Can* (1952); and *Silk Stockings* (1955).

Shown are a photograph of Cole Porter and the illustrated cover and music for **I've a Shooting Box in Scotland** (1916) with lyrics by T. Lawrason Riggs



Missus Lowsborough-Goodby
(1934)

(Niles Collection). Porter composed this song for his first (and unsuccessful) musical *See America First*.

Displayed are the covers for **I Worship You** (1929), **I'm Getting Myself Ready for You** (1930), and the cover and music for **Thank You So Much, Missus Lowsborough-Goodby** (1934), a witty song about the social set.

Case XI: Cole Porter

In this case appears **You're the Top** from Porter's 1934 hit musical *Anything Goes*. Starring in the cast was Ethel Merman whose rendition of **You're the Top** is the feature song. The cover indicates that this song was included in *Night and Day*, the 1946 Warner Brothers film biography of Porter starring Cary Grant and Alexis Smith. The recording of **You're the Top** was made on December 4, 1934 for the Brunswick label by Ethel Merman accompanied by Johnny Green and his orchestra (Niles Collection).

Another cover displayed is for **All Through the Night** (1934), also from *Anything Goes*. The cover depicts Ethel Merman in company with her co-stars William Gaxton and Victor Moore (Niles Collection). Other covers are for **Miss Otis Regrets She's Unable to Lunch Today** (1934), **Ev'rything I Love** (1941), and **Don't Fence Me In** (1941), the latter as included in the Warner Brothers film *Hollywood Canteen* (1944). The song was popularized on the screen and in recordings by Roy Rogers, Kate Smith, and Bing Crosby



All Through the Night (1934)

Case XII: Harry Warren

Harry Warren (1893-1981) devoted most of a nearly sixty-year career to writing songs for Hollywood musicals. A native of Brooklyn, he taught himself to play several instruments, including the piano. Warren's gift for songwriting led to success in the early 1920s, including composing for Broadway shows, and in the early 1930s he moved to Hollywood where his songs were featured in more than 50 films. A frequent collaborator with lyricist Al Dubin, their first major film for Warner Brothers was *42nd Street* (1932) in which Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler debuted in such numbers as **Shuffle Off to Buffalo**. Then followed *Gold Diggers of 1935*, which was directed by Busby Berkeley and included the Academy Award winning **Lullaby of Broadway**. Among Warren's other hit songs are **September in the Rain** (1937), **That's Amore** (1953), and **An Affair to Remember** (1957).

Displayed are the illustrated covers for: **Would You Like to Take a Walk?** from the 1930 Broadway revue *Sweet and Low*; **Shuffle Off to Buffalo** (1932); **I'll String Along With You** (1934) for the Warner Brothers film *20 Million Sweethearts*; **Lullaby of Broad-**

way (1935); **You Must have Been a Beautiful Baby** (1938) with lyrics by Johnny Mercer for the Warner Brothers production *Hard to Get*; and **On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe** (1945) with Johnny Mercer's lyrics for the MGM film *The Harvey Girls* starring Judy Garland. **On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe** is the feature song. The recording was made in 1945 on the Capitol label by Paul Weston and his orchestra, featuring Johnny Mercer as vocalist backed by the Pied Pipers (Gunshanan Collection).



Lullaby of Broadway (1935)